

How to Read Body Language: Part Three

by Carol Dunitz, Ph.D.

Lon Chaney Sr. was one of the most famous actors from the silent film era. He was known as 'The Man of a Thousand Faces' because of his ability to not only transform himself through creative makeup but also project different personalities and feelings without the use of words. Chaney developed his art of necessity. He was raised by parents who could not hear or speak, which forced him to cultivate his nonverbal skills. By addressing this need he inadvertently trained himself to understand and convey deep feelings without talking.

He became a master of body language. Early Hollywood recognized his talent and took advantage of it by casting him in hundreds of roles. While the silent film era has been and gone, a command of body language remains important. You can improve your personal and professional relationships by cultivating your ability to understand nonverbal communication.

When talented actors play roles, they recognize it is imperative to provide many believable cues to be convincing. This entails providing verbal and nonverbal communication that conveys what the character is feeling. Just speaking with expression is not enough. Just having certain facial responses is not enough. Just having telling mannerisms is not enough. All different aspects of the performance have to work together.

Combinations Substantiate Isolated Cues

One piece of nonverbal communication out of context may not provide enough information to provide the receiver with conclusive evidence of the speaker's intent. Evidence is significantly stronger when there are several pieces of information that complement one another. Let's imagine a young man courting a young woman. He comes to see her and presents her with flowers. What does he think if she simply smiles? Is she pleased? Is she simply responding that way because she thinks it is appropriate and feels she has to? What if she also moves slightly closer to him, places her hand on his lower arm, and says, 'Thank you.' Body language is more convincing when more than one expression presents concurrently.

Transitions Substantiate Isolated Cues

While individual movements or positions are not conclusive, transitions from one to another definitely direct the careful observer to meaningful conclusions. Let's assume two business people are engaged in an important negotiation. Throughout a meeting they are both engaged and leaning forward as they speak with one another. At some point, one person proposes a new idea. The other responds by leaning back in his chair, raising his arms and clasping his hands behind his head. How do you think the negotiations are going? The transition from one position to another speaks volumes.

Here are some nonverbal cues that tend to substantiate one another. The presence of multiple signs generally leads to reliable conclusions.

Agreement

- Inhaling fully
- Rocking one's body
- Shifting weight forward or upward

Boredom?

- Closing eyes
- Falling posture
- Turning away from you

Confusion.

- Asymmetrical position
- Blinking eyes
- Facing downward
- Fidgeting
- Furrowed brows
- Random movements
- Rubbing of eyes
- Shifting in one's seat
- Shuffling feet
- Wandering eyes

Defensiveness?

- Clenching teeth or hands
- Crossing arms or legs
- Pointing legs toward exit
- Placing hands on hips
- Pursing lips
- Turning upper body away

Dishonesty?

- Covering hand with mouth

- Touching Nose

Dominance?

- Expanding gestures
- Spreading arms and legs
- Standing with toes out

Impatience?

- Bouncing knee crossed over leg
- Crossing legs
- Tapping feet
- Rapping fingers of one hand against table

Interest?

- Leaning head and/or body forward and blinking
- Raising eyebrows inquiringly
- Smiling

Questioning honesty?

- Clenching teeth
- Furrowing brows
- Looking downward
- Grimacing
- Compressing lips into a thin line
- Squinting

Rapport?

- Aligning shoulders
- Establishing increased eye contact
- Leaning in

Resentment?

- Crossing arms
- Grimacing
- Looking away

- Stiffening of body

Submissiveness?

- Crouching
- Hugging themselves
- Reaching up to touch their throats
- Standing, toes pointed inward

Nonverbal clues are just that -- clues. No one exhibits every classic symptom. Sometimes people have taken charge of their nonverbal communication and don't show any marked indications you might expect. But most often, like the actors who portray emotions, people you communicate with will provide some nonverbal messages that reveal what they are feeling. Just look.

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